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ABSTRACT

There is an alarming trend in homelessness: children aged 17 and younger are the most rapidly growing group of the homeless; families continue to be a growing group of the homeless; and many people who are homeless were raised or have lived in the suburbs. Homelessness is no longer an inner-city phenomenon. Three homeless youth were interviewed during their stay at a shelter for the homeless. The lives of Tristan, Gillian, and Keith, and Gillian's two children, are presented as examples of these trends. Although their stories are not the stories of all homeless youth, they fit within the range of what homeless youth experience. Many "street kids" report leaving unbearable home situations. In Denver some have expressed the reality of their lives through an art therapy project called "Urban Peak Homeless Youth Advocacy" Murals. The murals are described and descriptions of what life was like living on their own are presented in the words of these three young people. The research suggests public schools are in a position to be of service to homeless youth. Tristan, Gillian, and Keith share their perspectives on how public schools could better serve homeless youth. (Author/EMK)

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ED 424 518

Living the Research:

Stories from Homeless Youth

Running Head: Living the Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to bring to light the lives of three homeless youth who fit an alarming growing trend in homelessness: those who are homeless tend to be younger and younger. Tristan Welton (17), Gillian (18) and Keith Sherwood (17) agreed to be interviewed during their stay at a shelter for the homeless in Denver, CO. Their stories are presented here. While Tristan, Gillian, and Keith do not speak for all homeless youth, their stories fit within the range of what homeless youth reportedly experience. The research suggests public schools are in a position to be of service to homeless youth. Tristan, Gillian and Keith share their perspectives on how public schools could better serve homeless youth.

There is an alarming growing trend in homelessness: children aged 17 and younger are the most rapidly growing group of the homeless; families continue to be a growing group of the homeless; and many people who are homeless were raised or at one point lived in the suburbs, indicating homelessness is no longer an inner city phenomenon (Callahan, 1996; James, 1996). The purpose of this paper is to bring to light the lives of three homeless youth who fit this growing trend. All three were raised in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. Their ages are 17 and 18. Keith (17) and Gillian (18) are married and have two young girls (ages 2 and 9 months). (Keith is not the biological father.) Tristan, Gillian's brother, is 17. In September, 1996, all three youth (and the two babies) were staying at a shelter in Denver, Colorado. They graciously agreed to an interview. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms; the stories shared are very real. These three youth are living what the research tells us. To distinguish my voice from theirs, their stories will be presented in italics.

The Research

From 1990 to 1995, the Denver metro area saw a 180 percent increase in the number of homeless children under the age of 17 (James, 1996). Many of them are from the suburbs (James, 1996). For most homeless youth, relationships with parents have been severed. Seventy

percent of homeless youth report their parents are unable to handle their behavior (James, 1995). Sixty one percent report abuse or neglect by their parents while thirty nine percent report that their parents abuse drugs, alcohol, or both (James, 1995). Sixty percent say their parents do not want them (James, 1995). Such reports are not unique to the Denver metro area. As an example, a survey of homeless youth (ages 17-21) in Chicago revealed over half left their home situations because they were neglected by their parents; three-quarters reported abuse; almost half reported alcohol abuse on the part of their parent(s) (The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 1993).

Many "street kids" report leaving unbearable home situations and in Denver, have expressed the reality of their lives through an art therapy project called the *Urban Peak Homeless Youth Advocacy* Murals.[1] Each of the four murals will be described, accompanied by stories from Tristan, Gillian and/or Keith.

Mural One: The Dysfunctional Family

In the center of this mural, a youth struggles for freedom by trying to break free of a strangling umbilical cord. Surrounding the center image are images of different types of abuse reportedly experienced by many of

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[1] Urban Peak is a day shelter located in inner city Denver. The shelter caters to at-risk youth, serving over 1,300 runaway and homeless youth each year.

the youth served by the Urban Peak shelter in Denver. Abuse depicted includes incest, parents arguing even before the child is born, crack babies, fetal alcohol syndrome, anorexia/bulimia, child pornography, and the mask the family dons for the outside world.

Tristan and his older sister Gillian are homeless because they chose to leave an unbearable home situation. Tristan explains, *My dad was real abusive much of our lives and we got away, but when we [Tristan and Gillian] did get away, we were in a homeless situation. That was about a year ago and ever since then it's been a consecutive circle: we'll get up, start getting things up, get an apartment and you know just something will happen and we drop back down to the same level we started at and it keeps repeating like that.* Gillian later adds, *My dad did a lot of drugs; was abusive and it wasn't gonna work for [me and] my kids. Not this Easter that just passed but the one before, we left. My dad tried to kill me.*

Tristan provides more detail: *The reason I'm homeless is domestic violence.*

Most people, their parents aren't on drugs or most people still have their dad, they're still with their dad and they haven't been abused. I mean, maybe they have, maybe I just feel like it's different. 'Cause I know that a lot of people that are homeless probably have parents who have an alcohol problem or a drug problem and they just lost everything they had 'cause that's all they wanted was that little hit or that little drink or whatever it was. So I just feel like me, it was a different situation—domestic violence. My dad was on drugs and he was just... he would be up for like a week at a time and then after he'd come down off the

drugs it was like he'd go into a psychotic rage and he'd just start... he'd keep you up for like two nights straight. You're not on nothing [drugs] but he is. And it's like you can't tell him to shut up or else he'll go off on you and it's like... so you just have to sit down listen to HIM.

He had a drug ring in our house so he went to jail for a while. But he went to jail and he got straight for about six months. But he went right back to it [drugs] after that. And he went to rehab. And he was so serious. He started going to church and then right back to it [drugs]. I don't know if it was just the stress that came back and he just wanted to turn to it again? But, like he was there for that time that he was off [drugs] and he was a good person. You know it seemed like he had goals and dreams and all that too that he wanted to accomplish. But that drug is what was holding him back from what he wanted to do.

My mom was on drugs also. But we didn't find out until 10, 11, 12—when we were smart enough to figure, "They aren't in the bathroom having sex so they must be in there, you know, doing something else." And I've been around the drug life all my life pretty much. I know what a "crack whore" is, you know, I've seen quantities...and it's just, it's a pretty sick world. I mean your dad taught you that kind of stuff.

But I don't [blame] my mom for it, you know, she quit doing drugs and she's getting her life back on track. It's just right now it's a real hard time for her to get her stuff together 'cause she's on welfare and he's [dad] not in jail but he's supposed to be in jail—he's on work release (he escaped) so he's out and about somewhere. He's supposed to be paying child support. He had a job—that's why he was on work release, to pay child support. So we're [mom, Tristan, and a

younger brother] not getting any child support so we're on a measly welfare check which ain't much. She [mom] can't work and she's trying to get into housing and you know, it's real rough 'cause welfare doesn't get you much. Foodstamps are OK but a welfare check just doesn't get you by.

Now, I thought my whole life was normal until we left and I realized what it's really s'posed to be like. I thought this was normal, this was what went on next door and this what went on upstairs in the next apartment, across the street! It's been this way and I've realized now that I've got more of an open mind so I CAN concentrate but then it was like I had so much...I didn't know that I had all this inside until we had left but I had so much inside I couldn't concentrate on, you know, schooling at all. I mean I was just... failed, I just straight failed it all so...

At the time of these interviews, it had been almost two years since Tristan had attended school. Gillian dropped out of school when she had her first baby at 16 and left home shortly after that. Tristan, Gillian, and Keith all shared vivid descriptions of what life has been like living on their own.

Mural Two: Life on the Streets

A coffin is in the center of this mural. In that coffin is a young woman surrounded by the pressures and temptations of street life: gangs, violence shown in the form of knives and guns, prostitution,

pornography, gang rape. The image of the young woman in the coffin is the likeness of a young woman who stayed at Urban Peak. The story goes she had managed to work things out with her parents to the point that she was ready to go home for a reconciliation. Leaving the shelter for home, she was caught in a drive-by shooting and killed. Also surrounding the coffin are depictions of feeling locked out of the system; social services as a vicious circle; going to jail as a result of engaging in "survival" crimes such as selling drugs, prostitution, or pornography; and a line to a crack house with no one coming out. There are masks in this mural as well. This time, they are the masks street kids don to protect their real identities.

Gillian describes what her life has been like since leaving home with an infant: *It's hard 'cause it was just me and my baby. My mom left me and I had no one so I just tried to work with the government. And the government didn't help much. I was just trying to do it all by myself and I couldn't go back to school.* Gillian was in and out of battered women shelters; since she and Keith were married, they lived in hotels, motels, and sometimes with friends. Keith explained, *This was my first time homeless! 'Cause I always lived with my parents. They had money, I had it good. Then me and her [Gillian], we got married and this is my family now. I can't leave her and go live with my family and have it good while she has it bad. If she's gotta have it bad, I gotta have it bad.*

Tristan, who had been living with his mother and younger brother, joined Gillian and Keith at the shelter because, *She's [mom] staying with her sister. She's in a hard situation so I came to stay with my sister here [at the*

shelter], to kind of make it easier on her [Mom] 'cause you know, my brother, we like to fight a lot and she lives like in a little bitty apartment. We can't have that. So I came here instead.

All three have dropped out of high school for different reasons. Gillian recalls, *I got pregnant with my first daughter when I was at Hensen High and they kicked me out. They said that it was encouraging other teenagers that it was OK to get pregnant at a young age. There was like a school for pregnant teenagers and I wasn't able to get in there because they had like a year, year and a half waiting list. So it was like by the time I would have gotten in there, it was time for me to graduate, so it was just really bad. "Oh well, guess I can't go back to school!" That took care of that!* Gillian was in her sophomore year when she dropped out.

Keith admits he *messed up really bad. I was doing what every teenager did—ditching school to go have fun. You know, I was doing what every teenager does. I just started ditching school to go smoke weed 'cause I thought it was cool doing it. And you know, it felt good and relieved all the stress and all that. But I think it put me no where...except for an empty pocket. I was supposed to have 16 credits and I only had one quarter of a credit, so I messed up. They made me [withdraw] 'cause I had no credits. I withdrew a week before tenth grade was over. Then I went to Griffith Tech (a trade school) for about two months after I dropped out of my high school. And it was better but a lot of gang violence was starting to go there. Like gang members that I don't want to be around that. There was fighting every day and you know, people trying to get other people in trouble. Each day, we'd get a new crowd of people going there, starting school*

and there's more gang and more gang, and you know, people throwing signs and this and that. And you know, I was, I've been clean from drugs for about a year and a half now and more drugs were getting around there. So I dropped out of there...

Tristan explains, *At the time I WAS in school, there was a lot going on at home. It was just like I started hanging out with bad kids in like fifth or sixth grade—I started hanging out with you know, gangsters and taggers and stoners*[2] *and just I was getting stoned and just going on a wild spree like a young kid, you know. Just not doing what I was s'posed to be doing with the school and I just, I didn't want to be there at all so I shoved it to the side. I was smoking pot and I was just, I was tagging, and I just, I basically just didn't even want to be there. I was getting kicked out of schools from fighting and ditching so much and my eighth grade year, I got kicked out of three schools. I was a pretty bad student.*

I didn't feel like school was a requirement in life. Then it was just like this is what I'm s'posed to be doing so I don't get my parents in trouble—"I have to go to school or else...you know, I go to jail." That's what I figured; that's what I always thought—if you're under 16 and you drop out of school you get taken away from your parents. That's what ***I*** *thought, I don't know if that's true or...but I know that 16 is the legal age to drop out of school, at least in Colorado, and that's what I did. I was like WHEW, "****finally****, 16!" That's basically what I was waiting for for a long time. So when I got to be 16, I just figured "I know enough now, I can go." 'Cause, you know, I know I felt like I was streetwise—I*

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[2]"Gangsters" are gang members. "Taggers" are graffiti artists. "Stoners" get high on marijuana.

was running away from home. I thought that was ALL I needed to know but, that wasn't true. I could have used a lot more education.

Despite dropping out of high school and facing the challenge of living on their own, Tristan, Gillian, and Keith all have plans to finish their high school education. All three talked of getting their GED. Tristan was working about thirty hours per week at an A & W, to help out his mom and *at the same time, get me what I want, not what I need*. He hoped to attend a school where he could develop his skills as an artist. Gillian provided her family's primary income by working as a waitress at a local restaurant while Keith took care of the children and worked on getting into a GED program. After finishing the GED program, Keith planned to work for a family friend while Gillian finished her GED. Gillian then hoped to go on for training as a dental hygienist. But, perhaps as you can imagine, it is terribly difficult to make plans for the future when you are not certain about being able to meet current basic needs such as shelter and food. Homeless youth especially face gaping holes in the service system. Generally, there is no coordinated service system for homeless youth on their own (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 1993; Youth on the Edge, 1994). The Homeless Youth Act (House Bill 97-1079), passed May 1997 in Colorado, will help to remedy this situation in time. However, too often, homeless youth feel they have fallen into a black hole.

Mural Three: Lost Souls

In this third mural, death is the theme, a very real presence for kids on the streets. This mural depicts a world held in the grip of evil; a world these kids are falling off of and no one is there to catch them. Gillian hinted at this when she described the difficulty she had trying to work with the government and her feeling that she had been *kicked out* of school for being pregnant. It would seem that the school system would be a natural place for youth who are experiencing problems at home to seek some help. Gillian, Keith, and Tristan all had examples of why the school is not perceived as a place of refuge or assistance.

When asked about using their school counselors as resources when they were in school, both Gillian and Keith laughed and provided the following commentary.

Keith: *They're not really counselors.*

Gillian: *They won't even talk to you. I mean I tried to talk to my counselors all the time. You know, "this is what's going on at my home," and all that.*

Keith: *Those counselors at school are like counselors to help you get a free lunch one day or... They're not there to help you mentally or nothin'.*

Gillian: *And then they're always too busy. They can't talk to you for that long. And so they're always trying to push you away.*

Keith: *Or they're only used for like if you get like detention: you go and sit in their office.*

Gillian: *And talk to them about what you did wrong!* (laughs).

Keith went as far as saying, *I think they [teachers] influence the kids to drop out.* He based that statement on his perception of teachers: *The teachers, they don't care about the children's education, they don't. They don't give a damn 'cause they got everything they need. They got the house, they got a nice car, they got money in their pocket, in the bank—they got everything they need. They're just there to get their paycheck and don't give a damn about the kids. Who cares if the kids go out and like blow their brains out? They don't care—they're getting a paycheck.*

While Keith was hard on teachers, Gillian was critical of parents: *What everybody does is just ignore the children and you know, they just let them pretty much do whatever they want. I can say this because look what my parents did to me: they let me go off and ditch school, they let me stay home and ditch school. They let me do all kinds of stuff. And you know why they do that? Because they get to a point where they can't control their own kids. BUT if there was a better way or even help to control the kids and not so much so much gang violence and so on and so forth, then it would be OK. But there's so much gangs-related stuff and so many gang members out there and so much around at home, that the kids, they tend to just go in that direction 'cause they don't have anywhere else to go. And I know 'cause I've been there, I've done it already and, you know, and then they don't go to school and don't try to help themselves, you know...and I don't know, I feel like you know, nobody cares. Everyone cares for themselves.* Keith echoed with, *The reason most people are dropping out is because so they can do their drugs and be in a gang. They think if they're in a gang, their family don't love them, the gang will love them. I thought that I was*

a cool gang member but then I started to realize all that was going to happen was I was going to get shot or land in prison or be paralyzed for the rest of my life.

Tristan wondered if perhaps an incident from the fourth grade is part of what influenced him to drop out:

When I was like in fourth grade, one of my teachers (he was Spanish; he was Mexican) and it was like almost an all Spanish school and I don't know, for some reason one of the kids went and told the teacher that I tried to stick his head in the toilet. And I never tried that! I never tried to stick his head in the toilet or nothin'!! I was like, "OK." So the teacher grabbed me, took me into the bathroom, tried to stick MY head in the toilet—the TEACHER! And ah, you know, just really ridiculed me and carried me into the classroom upside down and totally embarrassed me in front of all the students—made me feel you know, like this big—everybody laughed at me and talked about me. And you know, that's not something the teacher is supposed to do to somebody at all. And you know, that's just the kind of things that I think is what puts the schools down. There's a lot of teachers don't take their jobs seriously like their s'posed to—like that—I took that as a racist. Like he—just because I was white, he would have done it. But if it was a Mexican kid doing it to a Mexican kid or a Mexican kid would have done it to me and I went and told it to the teacher, that wouldn't have happened to the Mexican kid because he's a Mexican—that's the way I took it. I don't know if that's the way he [the teacher] felt. Maybe he was just.... He pretty much discriminated against me the whole year I was in there. And my mom ridiculed me: "Why'd you try to stick that kid's head [in the toilet]?" "I never tried to stick the kid's head in the toilet, Mom!" You know—"This is a lie, I'm

trying to tell you, please, you know, listen to me, I'm not lying." And it really bugged me 'cause she'd bring it up. And I'm like, "I'm not trying to lie; I didn't do it." So...

But I don't know if that's what put me down to school where I didn't want to be there or if it was everything that was going on at home or you know, maybe just a combination. 'Cause THAT really did bug me a lot after that happened and I still remember it like it was yesterday, what had happened.

A lack of attention from teachers was felt by all three. Tristan observed, *Maybe the public schools, there's not enough attention toward the students 'cause there's you know, usually like one teacher to like what, 30 kids in some classrooms? 'Cause public schools are pretty full. I think they need to up [increase] the staff, give some more attention to the kids, maybe you know, get some more funding for books 'cause I know when I was in school there wasn't many books and when there were books, you know, it's like they were all trashed and pages were ripped out and you couldn't do your homework 'cause there's pages ripped out, so it's like UGH!* Gillian recalled, *When I was in high school, and I'm going through high school and I was like three months pregnant or something, I had this science teacher—I couldn't understand anything he was saying because he wouldn't explain it well. You know, he would use these BIG words to—I was like, "I don't know, I don't understand what you're saying" and I'd try to ask him for help and he'd try to explain in these big words that I didn't know, you know?! And it was like, "well, I flunked that class" and I pretty much ditched that class because I couldn't handle it.* Keith shared that perhaps he would have stayed in school *If they [teachers] would have showed more*

attention—I think if they would have showed more attention to kids, start being a lot nicer, you know like a friend instead of an enemy it would have made a difference.

High school drop outs, homeless, and voicing feelings of isolation and alienation, these three youth are (perhaps surprisingly) hopeful about their futures. As stated earlier, all three plan to finish their high school education and possibly go on for further education. Encouragingly, they see options for themselves.

Mural Four: Options

Tristan, Gillian, and Keith all saw positive futures for themselves. When asked what he hoped his life would be like five years from now, Tristan painted the following picture:

I hope I have a nice house; you know, starting to raise a family; have a wife, maybe a kid; be in, you know, a big corporation where there's decent money and I can support my family. 'Cause I was raised as a poor kid and I don't wanna raise my kid that way. I want like to be able to give my kid...put him in a school where I know it's gonna be fair, he's gonna get the attention that he needs (he or she—I don't know why I always say "he"!). But you know make sure my kid—our kids—get all the attention at school that they need. 'Cause school nowadays is a necessity. You have to have schooling to survive pretty much in the world as it is now.

Tristan described himself as being *really good at free-hand drawing. That's basically what I want to do pretty much. I mean I've been drawing for a really long time but lately it's been where I'm like I just wanna get into that SO much and get paid to do something I love to do anyway, which would be like WOW, you know, hey! I could do this all day! I'm not gonna be a homeless person forever. I know that somebody out there wants my art. It's just a matter of finding where that person is and who it is. I'm gonna be somebody that works in one of these tall buildings over here [downtown] making money. I can always hope, you know.*

Gillian described the relationship she hoped to have with her daughters and their schools:

The future is our children and so what we gotta do is make a better future for our children. And the only way to do that is to make school better—more activities, things to do that are interesting,. What I want to do when my kids start going to school is I want to go in there and help them and be like a teacher's aide or whatever so that my kids also get used to that so I'll be there and I'll help them and help them after school 'cause I want to get involved in their schooling. And I think that will also help the school 'cause mommy's there to help. And I'm gonna encourage them and I'm gonna—I'm not gonna do what my mom did, you know, shove me in my room, shut the door and do your homework; turn off the radio, turn the TV off. I'm gonna sit down and I'm gonna help them and I'm gonna make it fun for them so that they do learn. You know, read to them every night so that they get interested in books, things like that.

Keith saw getting his GED as being directly connected to *making a good living*:

The jobs I want to do, they either...I mean the jobs I want to do that pay a lot, I know like I have a situation with my family: my brother-in-law, he does what I want to do (it's iron work) and he's got three kids and a wife. And he's got himself two cars, he's got himself money in his pocket, apartment with nice furniture, everything—they're set up. And he got a diploma and a GED and what he does requires a GED or diploma. That's why I want to get it. Soon as I get that, I can get a job with him. I've already talked to the boss—I worked for him once and I was too young (I was only 15; I told him I was 17) and he said I can't do it. He told me once I get my GED—or his boss told him once I get my GED or whatever he'd put me on. 'Cause I guess he knows the situation I'm in. I think the main reason why I want to do it is because I look at my brother-in-law, my sister, and my parents and I want to take after them [in terms of lifestyle]. It's something I want to do. Plus you make a good living at it.

The fourth *Urban Peak Homeless Youth Advocacy Mural* is distinctly different from the other three. Pressure was put on Urban Peak to create a mural with a positive message. The street kids who had created the first three murals were asked to paint the fourth one. They started but could not envision a positive mural. So few of them end up with "happily ever after" story endings that they could not bring themselves to paint a lie. Still under pressure, Urban Peak was able to draw upon the artistic ability of a former client, a young woman who had been able to turn her life around. It is obvious that the fourth mural was painted by a single artist

with a different view of life. A young woman sits in the middle of the mural with different life options floating around her: marriage, college, the military, employment. In the left bottom corner is an image of street life, a reminder of how easily and quickly one can be pulled back into that lifestyle.

Postscript

About six weeks after these interviews (November 1996), I had the opportunity to speak with the Family Services Shelter Coordinator. Tristan had left the shelter and was living with his mother and younger brother. Tristan was working and was the sole provider at this point in time—he had to put getting his GED on hold. Gillian and Keith were still living at the shelter, taking advantage of parenting and child development classes offered by a volunteer nurse and continuing to fit pieces of their puzzle together.

In July 1997, I had another opportunity to speak with the Family Services Shelter Coordinator. In the months that had passed, Gillian, Keith and their daughters had moved out of state. Keith had found a job and things were going OK until Gillian's father tracked them down. Gillian and Keith returned to Denver, seeking refuge at the shelter. As far as the Coordinator knew, Tristan was still living with his mother and younger brother.

The research tells us,

> Many youths want to succeed academically and move beyond their current crises; they want to finish school, go to college and obtain employment. While these youths bring a sense of resiliency and desire to the classroom, their lack of permanent and safe shelter often creates impediments to learning that are insurmountable (Youth on the Edge, 1994, p. 23).

This resiliency and desire to move beyond their current crises was voiced by Tristan, Gillian, and Keith. Is their resiliency and desire for a better life strong enough to move them beyond their current situations? We seem to like and even expect happy endings. Tristan, Gillian, and Keith predicted happier lives. However, Kozol (1995) cautions,

> The trouble with miracles, however, is that they don't happen for most children and a good society cannot be built on miracles or on the likelihood that they will keep occurring. There is also a degree of danger that, in emphasizing these unusual relationships and holding up for praise the very special children that can take advantage of them, without making clear how rare these situations are, we may seem to be condemning those who don't have opportunities like these or, if they do, cannot respond to them (p. 160).

As evidenced by their lives the last few months, breaking the cycle of homelessness is not easy. It is not easy for adults, let alone, homeless youth, who do not seem to have the same coordinated service system that is available to adults and children.

Standing in the Gap

Schools are in a position to be of service to homeless youth, but to be of meaningful service would mean changing the traditional structure of school (Norum, 1996, 1997b). The research indicates alternative schools, which by offering smaller class sizes, more individualized attention, and flexible deadlines for program completion, are much better suited to educate homeless youth than the traditional public school environment (Youth on the Edge, 1994). However, enrollment in alternative schools is generally limited and the supply does not meet the demand. Gillian would have had to wait over a year to get into an alternative school. Tristan, Gillian, and Keith spoke of a desire for greater interaction with teachers, and indicated demonstrations of caring may have influenced them to stay in school. But, with the current structure, teachers do not always have time to build relationships with individual students. All three youth also voiced a general boredom with school. When they described enjoyable times in school, the words "fun" and "one on one attention from the teacher" were used. This is not unique to homeless youth—schools are uninteresting places to be (Norum, 1997a; Sarason, 1990). While a constructivist[3] approach to learning "places students in the driver's seat of the learning process" (Grabinger, Dunlap, & Duffield, 1996, p. 4) by demanding a student-centered learning environment, such an approach requires a different and probably unfamiliar role for the teacher.

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[3]Constructivist learning theories assert that people construct their own knowledge.

Current school structures are not generally supportive of student-centered learning environments (Norum 1996, 1997a, 1997b).

When asked what the schools could do to better meet the needs of those in situations like that of Gillian and Keith, Gillian was quick to respond:

They need to make programs out there to help teenagers and also middle school—now they're starting to drop out. I think that they need to work with them A LOT—a lot more. I mean in grade school and everything they just pretty much pass them, pass them, pass them and the same in middle school. They just pass them even though they ain't, you know, really made it through every class, everything else. Even if they have bad grades they'll still pass them until they get to high school. And then they start really, you know, buckling down. But what they need to do is really make better programs and make it more fun. There need to be programs for kids not only for school, but you know like—OR EVEN after school programs, like a place to hang out to keep kids off the streets. They need to make more places for kids to stay off the streets and get entertained after school...and offer counseling, you know, also. Because kids are getting abused at home, like I did. And if I had everything that I wish I had now I'd be a much better kid. I mean, I was all stressed out, from being beaten by my dad and everything. You know, I mean they need to get places that WILL help the kid.

Gillian, Keith, and Tristan are asking for what other homeless youth have described as well: a "welcoming" school environment (Norum, 1996). A "welcoming" school environment is described as

> one where everyone could feel comfortable, regardless of their home status, gender, sexual orientation, race, or age; one where everyone was treated fairly and with respect; one where the school staff took time out of their day to talk to a student as a person; one where it was assumed that every student was capable of learning; one where awareness has been raised around the issues of homelessness and there is an understanding of how people become homeless so that the shame of being homeless is not perpetuated Norum, 1996, p. 9).

While it is not realistic to expect public schools to fill in the gap that exists in service systems, there are changes schools could make to limit the bureaucracy that in many cases serves to perpetuate poverty and homelessness (see Norum, 1996, 1997b).

Living the Research

What I have presented here are the stories of three homeless youth. I am not suggesting that Gillian, Keith, and Tristan speak for all homeless youth. However, their stories fit within the range of what homeless youth reportedly experience. Their stories make the research come alive.

Perhaps the challenge, particularly for those who work with youth, is to understand what life is like for homeless youth. To understand that often, homeless youth live literally from day to day. To understand that perhaps that youth may be trying to extract him or herself from a dysfunctional family situation. To understand that perhaps that youth may be concentrating on meeting basic needs such as food and shelter. To

understand that perhaps that youth is trying to obtain affordable child care for her children. To understand that perhaps that youth may be avoiding school to avoid being pulled back into a life of gangs, drugs, and violence. In short, school personnel especially need to be aware that sometimes when a student is having trouble concentrating and getting their act together, it may have to do with a homeless or near homeless situation. Perhaps that youth is experiencing something similar to what Tristan did:

I'm just glad that I got away from the situation I was in when I was younger. And now that I, you know, it just feels really good to finally have an open mind and be able to think straight without having like a, I don't know, it's like having a fog where you just can't think past a certain point. Like you're going in circles. I don't know, it was just a really weird situation. I just couldn't concentrate on ***anything*** *at all, you know, and now that I can, it's a great feeling that I have. That I can concentrate on what I need to do. And I know what I want now. I know who I am now. And you know, it's only been like a year and a half since I've been away from my dad. And I've realized a lot, a lot of things and I know what I want to do.*

Perhaps that youth is living the research.

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